The deceptive coherence of Marine Le Pen's electoral base

Aug 11th, 2021

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Version française ci-dessous

A recent poll by the French Institute of Public Opinion shows the possibility of a Rassemblement National (RN) victory in the second round of the next presidential election. While the poll gives a lead of a few points to Xavier Bertrand or Emmanuel Macron in the second round against Marine Le Pen, [1] it indicates a victory for RN against Anne Hidalgo, Yannick Jadot or Jean-Luc Mélenchon in that same round. The famous "glass ceiling" blocking the aspirations of the radical right-wing party could thus be broken by the disintegration of the "Republican front" if led by a left-wing figure.

A presidential election victory for the *Rassemblement National* (RN) is an alarming prospect, especially since the issues on which RN has strong credibility (security and immigration) are at the heart of current political debate, creating huge electoral opportunities for the far-right party. As the champion of these issues, RN has long fulfilled the role of a repository of social discontent, a role which has enabled it to avoid expressing well thought-out positions on economic proposals or socioeconomic issues. The relatively unrealistic project of leaving the euro in 2017 is proof of this. In 2022, Marine Le Pen's party will try this time to appear as the bearer of a credible social project. To achieve this, it needs to move beyond its favourite themes and muster an ideologically coherent electoral base.

Since RN's founding, its electorate has been in a state of perpetual change, evolving from a strong base among the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie and the liberal professions to an electoral base made up mainly of blue-collar workers, small business owners, and other self-employed people.[2] With one year to go before a major election, RN's indecisiveness about its future economic platform can be explained by the difficulty of bringing together a socially and ideologically heterogeneous electoral base into a coherent whole. RN's electorate has often been perceived as a monolithic block epitomised by the stereotypical RN voter (a white worker, poorly qualified, close to retirement, living in the suburbs and whose main concern is immigration). This figure is a "myth".[3]

RN's electoral base should rather be viewed as a "conglomerate" in which the social characteristics of individuals are heterogeneous, and their ideological positions are sometimes contradictory. Based on this premise, studying the ideological divisions within RN's electorate enables us to understand the difficulties Marine Le Pen faces in putting together a programme and narrative that can rally the largest possible number of voters. Such an analysis could also be instrumental in developing a strategy to counteract this reactionary political formation which, now more than ever, stands a chance of coming to power.

This article's contribution is based on an analysis of the data of a European survey conducted in 2019 in France, Germany, Spain and Greece. The results of the survey consist of a dataset of approximately 8,000 responses (comprising four samples of around 2,000 responses for each country) given by working-age people who voted in at least one election. Here we will focus on views concerning "cultural" and economic issues, as expressed by respondents – within the French sample – who voted for RN in the 2017 presidential election and the 2019 European elections.

Is RN's electorate a united political body?

Does the left-right divide constitute a significant reference point for RN voters? How do they position themselves on this axis? Our data point to an electorate fragmented between a pole representing 30% of RN voters, who are aligned with the most right-wing political position, and a smaller group politically situated at the centre. There was a certain consensus among respondents on their political identity being "to the right", since 55% of them claimed allegiance to one or other of the three positions furthest to the right. On the other side of the political spectrum, only 1% of RN's electorate appears to identify with the most left-wing position. However, about a quarter of RN voters (26%) chose the median position to define themselves politically. How can we explain such a disparity of positions among RN voters?

In the first place, less politically knowledgeable respondents traditionally gravitate by default towards the central position, so they cannot be aligned to either side of the left-right divide. A low level of formal education is an explanatory variable for the RN vote. What might also be at play, however, is a refusal by these respondents to position themselves on the left-right axis, as this political

division does not seem relevant to them. RN claims to have overcome the left-right dichotomy by appropriating political proposals from both these heritages, instead creating a more vertical divide based on the concept of nation versus globalisation.[4]

Lastly, positioning oneself at the centre of the political spectrum can be regarded as a strategy to avoid the "far-right" stigma attached to RN voters. Whether we are dealing with political naiveté or a desire to invalidate the traditional political divide (or avoid the stigma of being a far-right "Frontist"), RN's electorate appears to be divided between a majority that positions itself on the far right and a smaller group that positions itself at the centre.

Immigration as a unifying issue

RN is often described as a "niche party", i.e., a party that specialises in a limited range of issues. Historically, RN's rhetoric has been built mainly on the stigmatisation of people with an immigrant background. It is therefore to be expected that RN voters share a common attitude of distrust, fear or rejection of foreigners or those perceived as such. However, studies on the radical right-wing vote show divergent results as to the main reasons for this xenophobia. Some studies indicate that xenophobia is fuelled by limited access to resources – including access to the local labour market[5] and to social benefits[6] – being blamed on immigrants. Other studies focus mainly on the perceived "cultural threat" posed by immigration, which is deemed to distort local culture by importing new customs and values, thus reinforcing people's feeling of being "losers of globalisation".[7]

Our data illustrate the strong prevalence of xenophobia among RN voters. About two-thirds of them (67%) agree with the idea that foreigners are a threat to their country's national culture.[8] However, it appears that the strongest common denominator among this group of RN voters lies in the economic issues associated with immigration. Indeed, 78% of RN supporters consider that immigrants come to France only to take advantage of the social security system. As for the perceived role of immigrants in the labour market, "only" 62% of RN's electorate generally agree that foreign workers take jobs away from French nationals. The data therefore suggest that immigrants' reliance on the welfare state is perceived by RN voters as a more important economic issue than jobs. This reflects the emphasis placed on nationality when it comes to competing for the resources provided by the welfare state.

The limited social justice aspirations of RN voters

With the takeover of RN's leadership by Marine Le Pen in 2011, the party, which was the offspring of the far-right grouping *Ordre Nouveau*,[9] gradually shifted its focus away from security and migration issues to concentrate instead on the economic dimension.[10] In the Cold War climate of former times, Jean-Marie Le Pen – a radical anti-communist – had advanced a resolutely neoliberal programme, calling for privatisation and reproaching the state for being "wasteful".

In 2012, Marine Le Pen distanced her programme from the positions of the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP) on these issues. RN has since been striving to do away with the concept of the class struggle between labour and capital by replacing it with a purported conflict between the "small" and the "big", thus strengthening RN's populist image. However, while RN voters are united on the issue of immigration, they are split between two ideological poles: one demanding more social justice and the other expressing indifference on this issue.

More than half of RN voters (56%) support the redistribution of wealth from the wealthiest to the poorest, while one-third express indifference (as opposed to 46% in favour and 38% undecided in the national panel survey). As regards the issue of state intervention in the economy, the "social" pole, which is very much in favour of state intervention, accounts for only 16% of RN's electorate, while indifference is prevalent among 55% (almost the same figures as for the general population, i.e., 18% and 55% respectively). Support for social policies is nevertheless limited when it comes to strengthening the national welfare system in its current form.

In our survey, 38% of RN voters are indifferent to the idea of raising taxes to increase public services, while 51% want to reduce public services in order to reduce the tax burden (45% and 41% respectively in the national panel survey). This positioning of RN voters who at first sight aspire for social equity can be explained by a mistrust of the public welfare system and more specifically of users who would abuse the generosity of the welfare state. The rhetoric of "welfarism" (*assistanat*) targets people of immigrant origin, as mentioned above, as well as those receiving minimum subsistence income.

The social justice aspirations of RN voters are projected in terms of a three-tiered class consciousness[11] – that is to say, RN voters appear to define themselves as members of a "modest middle class" (*petits-moyens*)[12] suffering injustice from both above and below, caught as they are between the "big bourgeoisie" who exploit them and the lower classes who benefit from the fruits of their labour through "welfarism". Their merit-based sense of social justice is different from that historically advocated by the left-wing parties, which is structured around a dualistic social consciousness based on the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the working class.

A permeable three-tiered class consciousness

One component of the three-tiered social consciousness of RN voters is the projection of negative attributes on the unemployed. The perception of the latter depends on the social world in which individuals evolve, their professional experience and their direct relationship with unemployed people, e.g., family members or friends. However, the stigmatisation of "welfare freeloaders" is not hegemonic among RN voters. The data show a three-way split in RN's electorate between distrustful, empathetic, and indifferent attitudes towards the policies for the unemployed: 39% of RN voters strongly agree with the idea that most unemployed people are not really trying to find a job. Conversely, 29% of RN voters have a very empathetic attitude towards jobseekers. Three out of ten RN

voters (32%) take a neutral stance on the issue.

While the distrustful attitude appears to be more prevalent than the empathetic one when it comes to judging the goodwill of the unemployed, this ratio is reversed when it comes to employment conditions. In fact, 27% of respondents agreed that the unemployed should accept any job at the risk of losing their unemployment benefits. The empathetic and indifferent attitudes accounted for 37% and 36% respectively of RN voters. In 2017, RN's platform did not mention any proposals regarding the unemployed – a clever move by the party to avoid creating divisions among its voters.

While attitudes towards the unemployed are divided within RN's electorate, attitudes towards wage earners are less so: there appears to be a majority consensus on the need to uphold employees' rights. About one-half of respondents (57%) are completely against the idea that the government should make it easier to dismiss employees on open-ended contracts, and only 18% approve of this proposal. Similarly, four out of ten RN voters strongly agree that the government should make it harder to hire workers on fixed-term contracts. Curbing the hiring of workers on fixed-term (i.e., precarious) contracts raises the status of employees. Almost four in ten RN voters (37%) are indifferent to this proposal and only 23% are strongly opposed to it.

In view of these results, some RN voters seem to have differences with SME owners – even though the latter are also often described as "modest middle class" – on the issue of employees' rights. Divergent attitudes towards the unemployed and the lack of support for a liberal reform of employment contracts demonstrate that the three-tiered social conscience is not shared by RN's entire electorate. This finding indicates a weakness in the constitution of RN's electoral base regarding the key issues of the preferred economic system and the role of the state.

Labour issues as a suitable terrain for an offensive against the far right

Faced with a political and media agenda increasingly fuelled by the xenophobic and reactionary sentiments of the radical right, how might one impede RN's electoral success and gain a broad audience for an alternative project? Our results show that RN's electoral base is very homogeneous on xenophobia and security-related issues, but increasingly divided regarding "cultural values" and truly divided on issues relating to economic models and the role of the state. These disagreements can become real obstacles for RN which the left can turn to its advantage – for starters, by pushing Marine Le Pen to take a position on the abovementioned issues.

For example, RN's attitude towards the LGBT+ community can be described as a successful but precarious balancing act. The once ostensibly homophobic party has evolved into a more tolerant party towards gender and sexual minorities. However, RN is caught between the traditionalist component of its electoral base and a more tolerant, younger base of supporters. This is why Marine Le Pen did not participate in the demonstrations against "marriage for all".[13] The unity of RN's electorate is maintained only thanks to the absence of an official RN position on these issues.

It has furthermore been observed that a majority of RN's electorate clearly wants stability and security in employment conditions. Putting better contractual, social, and economic protection for workers on the political agenda is a way to drive a wedge into RN's electoral base, bearing in mind that RN intends to take a turn towards liberal economics in 2022.[14] This shift could effectively discourage the working classes from voting for RN, on the assumption that its anti-European and anti-globalisation stance – the basis of its social policies in favour of wage earners – appears to be fading away.

The left as a whole has tried to counter the far right by advocating for "national solidarity" through the defence of public services and by championing the economic role of a strong state. While important, this strategy seems insufficient to weaken Marine Le Pen's electoral base, since she is developing similar proposals while at the same time insisting on the need to improve the geographical coverage of public services. Obviously, Marine Le Pen's conception of public services is different from that of the left.[15] With its notion of national primacy, the nationalist party is calling into question the principle of equal treatment, and strengthening the state is viewed mainly in terms of its sovereign functions. Furthermore, a state intervening in economic affairs (to prevent relocations, for example) could easily become an integral part of RN's ideological matrix: the aim here would be to uphold French production while cajoling the national bourgeoisie with financial aid. Far from having to abandon a political project based on national solidarity, redistribution of wealth and the defence of industrial jobs, the left should continue to advance these issues as part of its strategy, but without fixating on them or turning them into a hobbyhorse. So, what might the left's platform look like in 2022?

The strength of the left lies in its wealth of policy proposals to improve the living standards of the working classes and to offer a real and immediate alternative to the capitalist system. To undermine the reactionary political agenda (punctuated by its polemical attacks on minorities of immigrant origin), it would seem appropriate to develop slogans based on the flagship concept of "wage-earner". Innovative proposals have been flourishing for a long time in the academic field and among activists. In its programme, *La France Insoumise* calls for a cap on precarious contracts in large companies and SMEs.[16] For its part, *Europe-Ecologie les Verts* (EELV) proposes an unconditional, individual, permanent and inalienable basic income benefit (*revenu d'existence*) which "is in line with a logic of moving beyond capitalism by advancing the principle of the right to exist outside the wage-earning system and the relationship of subordination it entails".[17] On the side of the communists, Bernard Friot's idea of a lifetime wage,[18] funded by transforming profits into social security contributions in order to grant every citizen an income, might also be put forward during the presidential campaign. All of this is compatible with and can be accompanied by an uncompromising anti-racist discourse in the face of the rhetoric of "cultural decline", which is so widespread in public debate.

There thus exists a common denominator among the forces of the left which would make it possible to halt the alarming rise of Marine Le Pen, and which would take on its full force if it were developed as part of a common strategy.

About the author

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